T/SOR/49/2/16

SELL AND BE DAMNED

The Glasgow Merrylee Housing Scandal of 1951

As Told By

Ned Donaldson
and
Les Forster

To Joan with all good
Wishes from
Ned Dodson +
Les Forster

Sell and be Damned

Ned Donaldson

and

Leslie Forster

Acknowledgements

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Guy Aldreds Strickland Press printed 30,000 leaflets and when Guy was told at the end of the campaign that the committee were skint and could not pay him he said to forget it as he thought it was a worthwhile cause!

Ned Donaldson worked in the building industry for forty-eight years, and was a member of the Bricklayers Trade Union for fifty years. At the age of 24 he was the youngest ever Federation Steward. He was at one time Chairman of Glasgow No. 5 Branch AUBTW and delegate & executive member of Glasgow Trades Council. Ned is now retired.

Leslie Forster was a builders labourer from 1945 to 1954. He was a TGWU shop steward and delegate to Glasgow Trades Council. From 1955 he worked on the Railway for thirty years, until his retirement.

Both authors played a prominent part in the events described in this book.

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Introduction

Over forty years ago the city of Glasgow was rocked by a housing scandal. It provoked anger, betrayal, disgust and strikes.

All this mayhem started on a patch of land on the south side of the city, in the district of Merrylee. On the site, almost completed, were 622 houses built for renting by Glasgow Corporation Direct Labour Department. In 1951 Glasgow was misgoverned by a Tory council using alias names such as Moderate and Progressive, who were hell-bent on selling council houses - a policy geared to making a fast buck. Four decades on, the selling of council houses stands exposed as short-sighted and foolish in the extreme, when councils like Milngavie and Bearsden find themselves with an ever-growing waiting list of homeless because housing stock was sold with abandon. This sort of thing is happening all over the country, and ranks with the poll tax as a major scandal.

After the First World War, Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George promised the returning servicemen homes fit for heroes. Was the con trick of 1919 to be repeated in 1951?

During the war years from 1939 to 1946 house building was at a standstill. Priority for the Labour Party was building rented houses: the private sector was to play a minor role. Published figures for 1947 indicated that Glasgow needed 100,000 new homes, but by 1951 the target was far from reached. A local baillie, James Duncan, commented: 'If the 46,800 homeless people in Glasgow marched three abreast, and with a one-yard interval between the ranks, they would form a procession five-and-a-half miles long.'

The Glasgow labour movement was energetic in the cause of the homeless, and literature on this matter was abundant. Pamphlets such as *Glasgow's Housing Disgrace*, *Houses in a Hurry* and *Build a Better Gorbals* sold by the thousand. House factors were pilloried for keeping insanitary property. Tenants were encouraged to submit 'sanitary certificates' to the town clerk. New tenants associations were formed; sub-let racketeers were exposed without mercy.

Some readers may think that the Merrylee struggle was in vain: eventually Glasgow gave in to the Thatcher Tories and sold council houses.

What they did was unforgivable. There are no cobwebs upon the events described in this book. It is a relevant and significant story for today.

A Day to Remember

Glasgow workers have always had a healthy suspicion of town councillors, and who can blame them? Tory councillors seem to be fast becoming an extinct breed in the city but it was not always so. In 1949 they were known as Progressives and Moderates, and held office from then until 1952 with fifty-eight members. Their Labour rivals had fifty-three. Through a travesty of democracy, Progressives and Moderates gained a working majority through two non-elected members, the Dean of Guild and the Deacon Convenor, both of whom were allowed to cast votes. Lord Inverclyde, the shipping magnate, indulged this farce.

At the housing committee, on the Tory side, would sit haulage contractors, a wine merchant, several solicitors, a cooked meat manufacturer, and some company directors. On the benches at a full meeting of the corporation sat the men of property. Some Labour members did not help matters, getting involved in graft and corruption. Barlinnie prison was to provide board and accommodation for such crooked public servants.

Once a month a flag flies from the rooftop of the City Chambers, signalling the monthly meeting of the full council. Those meetings are often very mundane affairs, with minutes duly approved, followed by committee reports. The debates lack lustre, and controversy and enlightenment are low on the agenda.

Apathy is the word used to describe the people's lack of interest. Come election time it is all so different - the electorate are patronised, and called most intelligent. But sometimes something happens inside those august chambers that sets folk astir and makes them angry, even rebellious.

A long time ago, on a November day in 1951, a man called McPherson Raitt, the housing convenor and a Tory to boot, walked into a meeting of the housing committee, proposing on behalf of his cronies that 622 houses under construction should be sold for profit. The housed were in a district called Merrylee, and were being built for renting by the Direct Labour Department.

In those days to even mention selling council houses in front of Labour councillors was like holding a red rag to a bull, and they were right. The meeting was a stormy affair. Although the Tories had a wafer-thin majority, no vote was taken, with the matter in hand deferred until the next meeting.

News of this housing scandal hit the headlines. It would be putting it mildly to say that workers felt outraged and angry. The truth is that those 622 houses caused strikes, mass agitation, deputations, constant press publicity, and the eventual toppling of a Tory-controlled town council. Hapless Mr McPherson Raitt became the target of justifiable public abuse. He even had his name changed, but not by deed poll. Building workers called him 'McPherson Rat!'

A Curtain Raiser

On Monday 3rd December 1951, shop stewards at Weirs Engineering works convened a conference at the Central Halls to oppose the sale of the Merrylee houses. Delegates from all sections of the labour movement were invited.

The Daily Worker reporter seemed to have high hopes for the success of this conference. A front-page story claimed

> The conference will undoubtedly recall the big campaigns of the past then Glasgow workers fought for better housing. It was the housewives of the city in 1915, supported by shipyard workers, who struck work, who forced the Government of the day to introduce the first Rent Restriction Act following the famous Clydebank Rent Strike. The same spirit is abroad today.

Would the conference sound the call for direct action, or fall into the deadening clutch of officialdom?

Apart from a goodly number of optimists in the audience, there was the usual traditionalists who could see no further than a routine deputation to the town council. There were others who thought that all would come right when Labour captured the polls at the next municipal elections.

But that was a long way off, May 1952 to be precise. By that time the houses would be sold. The building workers pushed forward a motion calling for a token stoppage on 6th December. After some argument the motion was carried: so the curtain began to rise on a series of memorable events.

Resolutions of protest came from Glasgow trades council and many trades union branches. Requests were made to the corporation to meet deputations. As long as protests were confined to this the Tories felt that they could weather the storm.

This sort of thing would not raise much of a flutter in their pigeon-holes.

But the building workers had other ideas. On 6th December, the day the Merrylee affair came up for discussion at the full council meeting, they threw down hammers, trowels, picks and shovels, and marched to George Square.

In the side of the main road to Edinburgh, a large housing estate called Cranhill was under construction. It was here that strike action triggered off walk-outs at other sites and factories.

Militant defiance was not new to Glasgow building workers: an organisation was already in place; most sites had federation shop stewards and trade unions were comparatively strong. The National Wage Campaign in support of 'the builders' tanner' had many followers in the city, and a rank and file paper, the *New Builder's Leader*, was widely sold.

Meetings had been held at Cranhill and other sites where decisions to strike were taken. Come the big day, builders from the east end converged on Cathedral Square, many on hired buses. Cathedral Square is of course a very historical place; in bygone

HOUSES
NEED
NOT
Workers
Houses

days it was a stamping ground for the soap-box orators. Nearby is a fountain dedicated to religious martyrs, and John Knox looks down on the square from his plinth. On the square itself stands the statue of King Billy, horse and all.

It was a determined, but cheery crowd of brickies, joiners, navvies, plasterers, hod carriers, painters, sparks and dumper drivers riding along on their machines, making their way to the main venue, George Square. Although sleety cold, the marchers did not seem to feel it. There must have been at least 700 on the march.

Jimmy Lamb, a joiners' shop steward, takes up the story:

> I was one of the joiners who went on the demonstration. Everyone on the site struck work, but they did not all come on the march. I took along my hammer and some nails. Placards were produced which had been hand-painted previously, on the site, with slogans. I took them up a close and nailed them together, and handed them out.

Lamb and Frank McGovern, a brickies' shop steward, were among four tall men who carried a model house, sent along from Weirs Engineering pattern shop. On the model house was the slogan in bold letters 'NOT FOR SALE.' The local Bricklayers' Trade Union ceremonial trowel was also carried at the front.

Willie Mathieson, a brickie, remembers:

> I recall a feeling of pride and satisfaction. A lot of these fellows must have been in the Army, like myself, and most of us were in step. Down in George Square, as I remember it, we disorganised traffic. Now this was a builders' demonstration, and I know there were other people involved, but by and large it was a rank and file affair, voicing utter and absolute disapproval.

Another shop steward, John Kerr. recalls:

> Well, me for one, when I left Mansewood site that day at dinner-time I went down on the tram, got off at Renfield Street. What was going through my mind?
> What if people don't turn up? What if they ignore it? I should have known better because of the state of the place. All the building workers like myself were staying with in-laws, and in single-ends and so forth, and here we were, building reasonably good houses and couldn't get them, and the council was putting them up for sale.
> My fears were unfounded when I walked along St Vincent Street to the square. It was good to see the crowds. They came out of all places - Frederick Street, George Street, St Vincent Street and Queen Street, the workers came pouring out of every opening. So it was great, and I reckon there were about 5,000 people there. I joined in at one of the points.
> It looked at one point that they were going to storm the doors of the City Chambers. One copper said to me, 'Look, if you have any say in this, would

Foundry Workers Protest Against Sale of Council Houses.

Photo by permission of Glasgow Evening News

A contingent of workers from Harland & Wolffs, Clyde foundry, marching to George Square, Glasgow, to protest against the proposed sale of 622 houses by Glasgow Town Council.

you try and stop them? We're along with you, we're in the same position ourselves. We can allow you to go so far! As a matter of fact, Assistant Chief Constable Docherty is in there with a crowd of men, their batons drawn to crack a few skulls.'
That could have been bluff. Anyway, good sense prevailed. Then we assembled in North Frederick Street. I can always remember, we had Tommy Cuddihy, who gave a bit of a talk, also Albert McKinley, AUBTW organiser, even some people who were attached to tenants' associations. All in all it was a great demo, in fact, I feel it was one of the reasons the Labour Party got back in at the next election.

The scenes in George Square were amazing. Thousands from sites throughout Glasgow; factory workers from Harland's foundry in Govan, who had marched all the way. Mavor and Coulson's heavy engineering works in Bridgeton had shut down for the day. Tommy McLaren, shop stewards' convenor, was at the head of this impressive contingent. More foundry workers had come from Maryhill and Possilpark. There were railwaymen from Springburn and engineers from Weirs of Cathcart. Listen to Bob Garland:

At that time I was convenor of shop stewards in Harland's Clyde Foundry at Helen Street, Govan. The issue of taking industrial action was put to a mass meeting of the workers, and the decision to stop work was carried overwhelmingly. Indeed, foundry workers led the contingent from Govan, headed by our union banner. As we proceeded up Helen Street, and past Ibrox Park, workers from a variety of factories joined the ranks, so that, by the time we got to George Square, it was indeed a very large demonstration.
I can well recall that we kept walking round and round the Square. Considerable traffic congestion was caused, due to the fact that the trams coming from parts of the city could not enter the Square to complete their journeys. This caused all kinds of transport problems. Then, as part of a deputation, we were admitted to the Chamber. We were given seats in the front row of the gallery.
Shortly before business was due to commence, a number of police officers occupied the second row. On football parlance, this was known as 'man-to-man marking.' Whilst our protest in the circumstances was understandably muted, the important fact was that a deputation from the workers' committee was present, and that the police had been activated by the Conservative council.

That there were police in the council chambers was not so important. Outside on the Square it was a different matter. The authorities had been caught on the hop, because no official permission had been sought from the magistrates to hold this demonstration. Police presence was pathetically thin on the ground.

It was decided that the Cranhill contingent with the model house should lead the parade. Officials of the Trades' Council standing on the pavement sent round to

their office for the official banner, and made a move to lead the demo. Frank McGovern told them in no uncertain terms that they were welcome to join the demo but they certainly would not be leading the march around the Square. Amongst the representatives from the tenants' groups were Alex McLarty, and Hugh Savage, from Bridgeton and Dalmarnock housing association. They were both allowed into the spectators' gallery.

Round the Square the demonstrators went: not once, not twice, but three times, and as they passed the City Chambers shouted out appropriate slogans. A number of delegations asked to be heard by the council meeting. All were turned down , except the Glasgow Trades' Council. News of this was conveyed to the protesters.

By now hundreds were milling around in front of the council building, and the atmosphere was becoming electric. Someone shouted out: 'If they will not hear us, we should go in and tell them ourselves.' A cry went up for the main door to be rushed, and it was, with Ned Donaldson being pushed to the front. It quickly became an unequal struggle. Only three constables were guarding the door, and one of them was the Assistant Chief Constable, Walter Docherty. A policeman panicked, drew his baton and swung it at Ned Donaldson. It was to Docherty's credit that he put out his hand and snatched the baton from the officer.

Then the drama switched to the cenotaph. Les Forster jumped up beside one of the granite lions which adorn the plinth. His intention was to get the assembled crowd to move away towards the rally being held in nearby North Frederick Street. Once again the police got their wires crossed. Two angry policemen pulled him down, shouting: 'You are desecrating the cenotaph.' They would have arrested him had it not been for another intervention from Watty Docherty.

The rally in North Frederick Street was a great success. There was no shortage of speakers - shop stewards, trade union officials , tenants' representatives all had their say. Perhaps the outstanding speech of the day was made by Paddy Cassidy, a labourers' shop steward, who graphically told the tale of two cities with wealth and luxury alongside slums, model lodging houses and squatters' camps.

Women from the slums of Gorbals spoke to the crowd. One of them held up a bag of rotten plaster from the walls of her house. Another produced a dead rat. Tom Cuddihy, a well respected leader in the shop stewards' movement, said his piece to great applause.

The outcome of the council meeting was reported to the audience. Apparently the Tories would not budge - the Merrylee sale was to go on. Early winter darkness was drawing in, and this great meeting was coming to an end. But those who had fought the good fight were in no way dispirited and downcast. Above the noise of the dispersing crowds could be heard the slogans that had been shouted so vociferously all day:- 'NO SALE AT MERRYLEE'; 'HOMES FOR THE NEEDY, NOT THE GREEDY'; 'NOBHILL FOR THE RICH, BARNHILL FOR THE POOR.'

Two men who had done much to make the day a success, Eddie Lafferty and Willie Mathieson, add a postscript to all that had happened.

'I consider myself proud to have taken part in the strike against the sale of council houses. It was a workers' day,' comments Lafferty.

Mathieson remembers: 'On my way home I found the headlines in the *Evening Citizen*; 'City Chambers Stormed - Builders Protest.' We had shown our dissatisfaction that people were still living in bad conditions.'

It was indeed a day to remember.

Anger above, below and outside

The events of 6th December were front-page news. The *Evening News* headline read:- 'Crowd Storm City Chambers: Protest Over Sale Of Houses - and Row in the Council.'

But it seemed to have been much more than a row, according to the *Daily Herald,* whose reporter claimed that Glasgow corporation had held its stormiest debate in years, adding:- 'One Labour member was suspended and a young man dragged protesting from the public gallery.' Speaking in the debate, the leader of the Labour group, councillor Andrew Hood, said that it was a betrayal of the hundred thousand people on the waiting list. It would go down in history as a Progressive scandal.

He was followed by councillor John Inglis, who described the selling stakes as 'an iniquitous proposal, part of a deliberate policy. The homeless of Glasgow now know that they are 622 places back in the waiting list.' On to their feet jumped the Progressives, shouting: 'No! No! No!'

It was left to housing convenor McPherson Raitt to put the selling proposals. He went to some length to justify them, saying that the corporation had a right to sell the houses; it was laid down in the Housing Act. Then he trotted out the spectre of the 'Loan Debt' and the deficit, but conveniently forgot to mention the vast sums paid in interest to the money-lenders. City treasurer Kelly echoed his master's voice. His attitude was simply: 'We must sell to cut loan debts. Of course, if the Tories had been really interested in reducing the housing deficit, a solution was to hand; to seek interest-free loans.

At this stage in the proceedings the housing convenor read out some letters which he said were written by working-class people who wanted to buy the Merrylee houses. He even had one from a humble home in Govan, in which the writer made financial promises: 'I can put down almost the whole amount of the purchase price, and hope that a bond of £500 would complete the purchase.' To stake this sort of money for a roof over one's head was beyond the reach of most Glasgow workers.

Councillor Raitt went on to say that the City Factor's office had received 609 applications. The list was made up of 47 corporation tenants, 457 from the waiting list, 82 not on the waiting list and 23 of no specified category.

The Progressives' arguments were countered and debunked on the Labour benches. Baillie James Duncan, seconding an opposition proposal, said: 'Of 46,000 homeless families in the city, many living under the most appalling conditions, only 329 had shown an interest in buying one of the 622 houses,' and concluded, 'There are thousands of people in Glasgow whose plight is desperate, and it is sheer hypocrisy for Tories to say they are concerned for their welfare.'

From various press reports, it would seem that the Tories were keen to curtail the debate. Several Labour councillors were on their feet demanding to be heard. Prominent amongst them was councillor Mains, who represented Hutchesontown. When told that the debate

We demand
RENT
BUILDING
SITE

was closed, he refused to sit down. The Progressives cried for a vote, but Mains defied them, shouting: 'I represent a section of the community and I am going to speak on their behalf.' Not long after his outburst, he was expelled from the chambers.

Up in the public gallery a young man wearing glasses shouted: 'You can't take a vote now. People are dying from TB. If you vote on this you are condemning them to death... nothing will keep the workers of Glasgow back... there will be thousands demonstrating.' Below it was mayhem and confusion, with the Progressives calling: 'Vote!' and Labour demanding a roll-call vote, which was refused.

The town clerk counted 56 Tory votes by a show of hands. Labour were still protesting, and did not vote. The motion containing the proposal to sell Merrylee houses was carried.

Almost everyone inside the City Chambers was conscious of what was happening outside. Some Progressives lost the place, getting uptight and ratty. They alleged that the demonstration was manufactured. Building workers should get back to work - stop protesting, get on with building houses. But coucillor Hood understood the situation when he said: 'The demonstrations outside are a spontaneous demonstration of the people. Do not believe it was inspired by the Communist Party. It spells destruction for the Progressive Party.'

There was a connection between Alex McLarty, the young man who shouted from the public gallery, and the older man, Andrew Hood. Both men were associated with Partick and had fought in defence of tenants' rights. Alex was a leading member of the local Housing Association, and Andrew had worked tirelessly during the famous Clyde rent strikes at the time of the First World War.

Alex McLarty was an ardent socialist and a member of the Communist Party. Some years later he disagreed with their policies and resigned. Andrew Hood was a forceful propagandist for the socialist cause. A prominent figure in the Independent Labour Party, he edited a local Partick newspaper, and at one time represented this district on Glasgow Corporation. He was later to leave the ILP and cross over to the Labour Party.

On the Campaign Trail

The George Square demonstration sparked off the formation of an action committee. No-one did more to get the committee off the ground than Tommy Auchincloss, a patternmaker and shop steward working at Weirs, Cathcart.

The foundation meeting was held at the Auchincloss house. Bob Garland of the foundry workers was appointed chairman. An electrician, Joe McCaffrey, was put in charge of the purse-strings. Ned Donaldson and Les Forster represented the building workers point of view. Tommy Auchincloss was elected secretary. His hospitable wife, a zealous campaigner, agreed to take the minutes. Action was the order of the day. No time was lost in preparing a series of events that would focus public attention.

Tommy Auchincloss recalls:

> We would have public meetings in Parkhead, Tradeston, Gorbals and as many venues as possible. The meetings were to take place in public halls. Our campaign had to be kept in the public eye. The urgency of forcing the Tory-controlled council to abandon its house-selling plans was always on our minds.

At least twice a week members of the committee went round the Glasgow newspaper offices with prepared statements and items of interest. Unlike today, newspaper circulation was booming in the Glasgow of the 1950's. There was the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Bulletin*, the *Daily Record*, the *Scottish Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*. The *Scotsman*, although printed in Edinburgh, had an office in the city's Gordon Street.

A few doors down was the Daily Worker, whose Scottish editor was Harry McShane, and by the river-side the *Daily Herald* office, where the eminent industrial correspondent John Hossack wrote his story of the day. Just as today, there was the usual press hostility towards working-class interests with an exaggeration here and an inaccuracy there. In the main the campaign committee got a reasonably good showing.

There were also three evening papers, the *Times*, the *Citizen* and the *News*, and now there is only one. In addition to all this there was a widely read socialist weekly *Forward*.

Over two thousand workers packed St Andrew's Halls on the evening of Thursday 13th December 1951. They had come from all over the city to add support to this protest rally organised by the Labour Party. On the platform sat a battery of MPs, a former under-Secretary of State for Scotland, a representative from the STUC and a throng of town councillors.

There was a surprising addition to the speakers; Les Forster, a spokesmen for the joint action committee. In the past the Labour Party leadership had frowned on anti-

parliamentary action, and locally they disapproved of rank-and-file direct action, and rank-and-file movements.

That night the rafters rang with rhetoric. James McInnes, MP for Glasgow Central, said the proposal to sell the houses was inhuman and immoral. He pointed out that in the Glasgow *Evening News* of the previous week there had been advertisements for 200 houses to be sold and recently a further list of 210. There were sufficient houses for sale, he said.

A housewife, Jean Moffat, told the audience that she had waited ten years for a house, adding that she had no objections to people owning their own homes, but objected to people owning other people's houses.

It came the turn of Les Forster to speak:

'It is the responsibility of the trade union movement to see to it that the job at Merrylee is black,' he urged, 'If workers move off the job, not a brick or piece of plaster should be put on any house.'

Forster called on the workers not to leave the fight to the building workers, but to demonstrate the following Thursday in George Square.

Once again Andrew Hood, leader of the Labour group on Glasgow corporation, went out of his way to praise the demonstrators of 6th December. But was that enough? After a resolution was passed unanimously, workers stood up in various parts of the hall, demanding that Labour MPs play their part in the following Thursday's demonstration.

Unfortunately the demonstration never took place due to lack of support, the approaching Christmas and New Year holidays, and insufficient time for planning and organisation. But the fight was by no means over. Council house sales had become a national issue, an issue which was raised in parliament, aroused protest from the TUC and expressions of alarm from Edinburgh and Dundee town councillors.

Against this background, the action committee felt it was time to beard the Scottish Lion in its den, at St Andrew's House, in Edinburgh. The Secretary of State was James Stewart, a well-bred Tory. On Saturday 22nd December 1951, it was up and away to 'Auld Reekie' with a full busload of delegates representing factories, building sites and tenants' associations, armed with placards and large bundles of propaganda leaflets. On arrival at the capital, the delegates were met by a posse of Edinburgh police.

The account of what happened is taken up by Tommy Auchincloss:

HOMES FOR RENT NOT
STOP THE SALE OF MERRYLEE HOUSES!
HOUSING ALLOCATION MUST BE BASED ON NEED NOT INCOME
HANDS OFF THE WORKERS HOME: WINNIPEG
E.T.U
WORKERS
Now!
WEIRS
TPA

> When we got to Edinburgh, we made the mistake of not asking permission to have the demonstration. The police told us that we could not march on the streets. They put us onto the pavement and this probably helped us better because we were bringing more notice to the pedestrians walking along Princes Street. When we got to St Andrew's House we were ushered in. We did not meet the Scottish Secretary.

What ensued was a typical snub, a fobbing-off job. James Stuart was said to be in London, the Minister of State was in Glasgow, and the two Under-Secretaries were out of town. A Mr Craig Mitchell, a senior official in charge of housing, said he would meet and talk with the delegation. The delegates gave the thumbs down to this offer; they turned their backs and walked out of the building. Although they came away empty-handed, the day was not a failure a public meeting was held outside St Andrew's House and reported in the press.

During the rest of December the campaign against the sale moved from the industrial area into the districts. Meetings in all the main areas were organised by tenants' associations, Labour Parties and Communist Parties. Large meetings were held in local halls, addressed by speakers from the Merrylee campaign committee, who were given enthusiastic support for their actions on the 6th December demo. There was even an open-air bonfire meeting in the Partick area.

Well-attended lunchtime factory gate meetings were addressed by representatives from building sites and tenants' associations, and pledged full support for the campaign. At a meeting with the city Labour Party the Scottish miners' leader, Abe Moffat, pledged full support to the Glasgow workers for any action they took in the struggle.

The Merrylee question was raised many times in parliament by the Glasgow Labour MPs, only to be stonewalled by the Tories. The Scottish TUC and the local Trades' Councils discussed the issue and steps were taken to oppose the Tories, including a request to see the Secretary of State early in January.

A good propaganda move by the corporation building workers took place around Christmas. In the in-house news sheet issued to all employees, the corporation sent the workers a New Year greeting along with a message from the Tory Scottish Secretary thanking them for their efforts during 1951. This angered the workers, who only a couple of weeks earlier were told that instead of demonstrating against the Merrylee sale they would be better at work. Every single one of the greetings was collected and delivered back to him with a message, telling him how they felt. The press gave this good publicity, and a propaganda point was scored by the shop stewards!

On 2nd January 1952, smack in the middle of the New Year holidays, the Secretary of State said he would meet a delegation. A number of representatives went through to Edinburgh for the meeting, which turned out to be a damp squib, plenty of platitudes but no promise to halt the sales. It was a second-string man, Under-

Secretary T.D. Galbraith, who met them. He came from a very wealthy family, and had never had a housing problem in his life.

FIGHT FOR HOMES NOW!

" It's no use waiting for a house "—That is what Glasgow Tories are telling the 100,000 families on the Corporation waiting lists.

Despite all the Tory humbug about the housing needs in Glasgow, the decision to sell 622 houses at Merrylee, originally built for letting is the most shameless and cynical abandonment of homeless families in favour of the rich and well to do. Of course, the Tories say—Anyone can apply—Applications also will be treated according to need. You can also apply if you have £200 or £300 and can afford the loan and interest repayments of from £2 10/- to £3 per week.

Whilst working class families are breaking their hearts in slum conditions by overcrowding, lives imperilled by dangerous buildings, the rich queue jumpers are to be offered all the housing amenities the Corporation can provide.

The plain fact is that during 1951 less than 20,000 houses have been built in Scotland—more than 6,000 less than in 1950. There will be further cuts in house building, and from the limited accommodation available, less and less houses will be offered for let, and the only chance of permanent accommodation for the 40,000 homeless and the thousands of other families needing homes will be in Forresthall or Bonhill.

Council tenants should also take warning. This decision opens the door to the gradual abolition of housing subsidies—the break up of Council estates and increased opportunities for private landlords and speculative builders to rob the tenants and the certain increase of housing rents.

The Shop Stewards and 5,000 building trades and engineering workers who protested against the outrageous decision of Glagow Corporation have given a lead to every worker in the city. Their call for a further demonstration to the Corporation on Thursday, 20th December, should receive the fullest support.

The Corporation and the Government must be told the people will not tolerate this turning of a blind eye to the people's needs, whilst shamelessly sacrificing the homeless in the interests of the Tory's property owning friends.

The demand must be raised.

Reverse the outrageous decision to sell the houses at Merrylee.

Build only houses to let.

Demand more houses at rents the working class families can afford.

The Aftermath

On the corporation sites, a campaign inspired by the management got under way. The aim was to get rid of the activists, which they did. Jimmy Lamb was paid off, and Les Forster was sacked on a trumped-up charge. Victimisation and intimidation became the order of the day. Ned Donaldson remembers being given a warning form a top official, a Mr Cunningham, to be cautious, to watch his step. Some time after this he was sacked, despite being the recognised federation steward on the Cranhill site. His trade union did little in his defence.

Throughout the month of January 1952 preparations were being made for the demonstration to be held on the 30th. When it took place it turned out to be a very different protest form the one held the previous month. This time the building workers were not so prominent, and although many Clydeside factories were well represented, it was a very official and quite tame affair.

The organisers asked the magistrates for permission to march, and the ground rules for the day were set by the Glasgow police, who made a meal of it. On the eve of the demonstration the press published magisterial edicts bound by severe restrictions. The marchers must go round the square anti-clockwise, keep off the pavement in front of the Chambers, and the central part of the Square itself.

One report in the *Daily Record* claimed that there were more police than demonstrators. This, of course, was a bit of an exaggeration; nevertheless, police presence was heavy. It was estimated that more than a hundred constables were on duty, backed by squads of mounties. Out of sight behind the council buildings were sixty men on stand-by. Two Assistant Chief Constables were there, and Special Branch detectives mingled with the crowd.

The *Daily Worker* of the following day said that the attendance was 3,000. But the Tories said: 'We Shall not be Moved', and an opposition Labour amendment was defeated by 19 votes to 17.

At the municipal elections of May 1952, Labour romped home with a majority vote. The first full meeting of the council saw the proposal to sell off Merrylee houses put to rest and buried. Overnight the Tories became a silent minority. Surprise, surprise - they did not even bother to vote against Labour's motion rescinding their sales policy. The scoreboard read: Labour 60, Tories nil. Then they got to fighting amongst themselves.

McPherson Raitt, arch-villain of the day, turned on his supporters, angrily rebuking them for throwing in the towel. He said:

> I have no intention of insulting my colleagues, but I feel I have a right to speak as a former housing convenor. At one time I was a wonderful convenor, but I have learned that in twenty-four hours it is easy to go to the bottom of the class.

Conclusion

Why did the authors decide to record these events after forty years?

During the course of our research, we found that the 'Merrylee Affair' receives little mention amongst books concerned with social and political history. Yet housing remains the biggest social issue in Scotland today, and Glasgow's housing problem is dubbed the worst in Europe. The almost criminal decision to authorise the sale of council housing has only exacerbated the problem.

A recent Shelter report states that since the 'Right to Buy' legislation came in, an astonishing 113,800 houses have been sold, and council house building has been reduced by six per cent. This means, of course, that the best houses are taken out of the public sector, and the poorest stock is left for the poorest people.

Surely it was to be expected that the Tory Party, with a huge parliamentary majority, would do nothing other than put the best of the houses on the market. In the beginning, Labour-controlled local authorities expressed opposition and some reluctance to carry out Tory legislation. There was a time when they shouted from the rooftops about municipal socialism. Men like John Wheatley and Davie Gibson led a housing crusade. But after all their huffing and puffing, they have carried out Tory policy. Perhaps it would have been more honourable if they had washed their hands of the whole business.

At this late date it seems to be moonshine to expect the Labour Party to stop private sales madness, and revitalise Direct Labour departments. Perhaps veteran campaigner Eddie Lafferty had it right when he said it was only public agitation that smashed the poll tax. The Merrylee story contains many lessons for today.

So what had begun with a bang went out with a little whimper. It would be at least three decades before Glesca' folk were to hear once again about sell-off of council houses.

Daily Record and Mail.

LABOUR REGAINS CONTROL OF GLASGOW

Merrylee house sales end

What the papers said:

CROWD STORM CITY CHAMBERS

Evening News

Uproar in first city to sell houses

Daily Worker

CITY TORIES WILL SELL 622 HOMES

DAILY HERALD

£2.00

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Mortgage Payment Guard

It's important to note that this insurance cover is normally only available when you take out a new mortgage with Bank of Scotland. No medical is required, but you must be under the age of 60 at the date of the application.

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Bank of Scotland can offer a special insurance scheme, at attractive terms, underwritten by the Sun Alliance Insurance Group. This insurance protects your property against a wide range of specified perils, such as theft, fire, storm, flood and frozen tanks and pipes. To help protect you against inflation, the Sum Insured is 'index-linked' which means the Sum Insured is changed automatically whenever there is a movement in the average cost of house building. There is NO CHARGE for any increase between renewal dates. This means you don't have to remember to increase your sum insured each year, but it is important to advise the insurance company if you have carried out any major property improvements which increase the value of your property, to ensure that your property is fully covered at all times.

To spread the cost and help you budget you can pay the premiums by monthly direct debit at no additional cost. *Full details are available from any Bank of Scotland Branch.*

In addition to protecting the building, it is just as important to safeguard the contents of your home and your personal possessions. We can provide a comprehensive 3-in-1 insurance plan, arranged in conjunction with Royal Insurance (UK) Ltd. This scheme incorporates three types of cover within one policy at a competitive premium rate.

House Contents Insurance